

White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940

Margaret D Jacobs. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

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There is no greater marker of the difference between present-day attitudes to family bonds and those of the period from 1880 to 1940 than the question of the removal of children from their families “for their own good.” The recent spate of official apologies to victims – indigenous, unmarried or just plain poor – whose lives were shattered by this widespread practice bears witness to this difference. Margaret D Jacobs, a Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Nebraska, examines the motivations and the practice of the removal of indigenous children in *White Mother to a Dark Race*. She has been brave enough to tackle a comparative study of two national groups, Native Americans of the United States West and Aboriginal Australians. In successfully carrying out this comparison, she has demonstrated that this was not a national phenomenon, but one that was shared by at least these two countries.

Jacobs argues that what these two countries share is a history of settler colonialism, and that the hunger for land is the ultimate cause of the problems that child removal policies were designed to deal with. In this larger context she sees maternalism, a well-meaning but condescending sense of superiority by white women, as the rationale and means of carrying out what were essentially cruel and ignorant policies. With settler colonialism and maternalism in common, each country had its own chronology and variations on the basic agreement that indigenous children needed to be separated from their parents and communities. In the United States, a policy of “assimilation” was instituted in the 1880s and in Australia what was termed “protection” was consolidated between 1886 and 1911.

Interestingly, Jacobs finds no evidence of an exchange of ideas between the two countries. Both, however, developed policies that required placing children, sometimes as early as age three, in institutions intended to re-socialise them into “useful” citizens. In the US, officials usually relied on inducements to persuade parents to place their children in boarding schools. In Australia, force was increasingly used to bring children to the poorly run settlements that were often little more than prisons. All in all, the Australian system was more draconian: it was intended to make a permanent break with the children’s families; it made little attempt to educate the children; the schools were underfunded, dirty, cruel, and run by people who were ignorant of the cultures from which the children came. Too often the system resulted in broken lives, people with no culture, either indigenous or white.

Jacobs develops her argument in detailed chapters tracing the interwoven history of settler colonialism and gender in each country, the design and practice of indigenous child removal policies, the collaboration of the “Great White Mothers” in attempting to erase indigenous family practices and ties, and the disastrous consequences of these policies. Her most interesting and heartening chapter, “Challenging Indigenous Child Removal,” traces the alienation of some white women from the system they had been part of. Seeing at first hand the devastating effect of child removal on the children, the families and the communities, these women began to question the entire policy. The most vociferous of these was Australian Mary Bennett, who developed a comprehensive critique of official policies and called for restoration of native land and full rights for Aborigines. A wide range of images adds interest and pathos to the story Jacobs tells. She has also provided excellent maps.

Jacobs deservedly won the Bancroft Prize awarded by Columbia University for a distinguished work in American History for *White Mother to a Dark Race*. It is a big, brave, heart-breaking book that combines feeling with impeccable scholarship and bold methodology. Like *Drawing the Global Colour Line* by Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, it demonstrates the intellectual gold that results from the hard work and bold thinking of transnational scholarship.

Works Cited

Lake, Marilyn and Henry Reynolds. *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2008.

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